

## Problems and suggested solutions in teaching English through gamification at universities

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**Annotation:** *The integration of gamification in English language instruction at the university level has gained global attention as an innovative pedagogical strategy to increase student engagement, motivation, and language proficiency. This paper explores the challenges and potential solutions for implementing gamified learning in higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory, Flow Theory, and Constructivism, the study analyzes the compatibility of gamification with contemporary language acquisition approaches. Key obstacles – such as technological limitations, lack of institutional support, insufficient teacher training, and cultural attitudes – are critically examined in the context of Uzbek universities. Practical solutions are proposed, including teacher professional development, curriculum integration, low-tech gamification strategies, and the promotion of digital literacy. Furthermore, the paper highlights a range of gamification platforms that can be effectively used in classroom settings, even with minimal resources. The study concludes that with proper support and contextual adaptation, gamification can be a transformative tool in advancing English language education across Uzbekistan’s higher education system.*

**Keywords:** *gamification, language learning, higher education, Uzbekistan, digital pedagogy, English teaching, educational innovation, digital tools*

## Проблемы и предложенные решения в преподавании английского языка с использованием геймификации в университетах

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**Аннотация:** *Интеграция геймификации в преподавание английского языка на университетском уровне получила мировое признание как инновационная педагогическая стратегия для повышения вовлеченности студентов, их мотивации и языковой компетенции. В данной статье рассматриваются трудности и возможные решения внедрения геймифицированного обучения в высших учебных заведениях Узбекистана. На основе таких теоретических концепций, как теория самодетерминации, теория потока и конструктивизм, анализируется совместимость геймификации с современными подходами к изучению языка. Основные препятствия – технологические ограничения, недостаток институциональной поддержки, нехватка подготовки преподавателей и культурные особенности – критически рассматриваются в контексте узбекских университетов. Предлагаются практические решения: повышение квалификации преподавателей, интеграция в учебные программы, стратегии геймификации с минимальными технологиями и развитие цифровой грамотности. Также подчеркиваются платформы геймификации, которые можно эффективно использовать в аудиториях даже при ограниченных ресурсах. В заключение делается вывод о том, что при соответствующей поддержке и адаптации к местным условиям геймификация может стать преобразующим инструментом для развития преподавания английского языка в системе высшего образования Узбекистана.*

**Ключевые слова:** геймификация, изучение языков, высшее образование, Узбекистан, цифровая педагогика, преподавание английского, образовательные инновации, цифровые инструменты

## Universitetlarda ingliz tilini o'rgatishda gamifikatsiya orqali yuzaga keladigan muammolar va taklif etilgan yechimlar

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**Annotatsiya:** Universitet darajasida ingliz tilini o'rgatishda gamifikatsiyani qo'llash talabalarning darsga jalb qilinishi, motivatsiyasi va til ko'nikmalarini oshirishda innovatsion pedagogik strategiya sifatida jahon miqyosida e'tirof etilmoqda. Ushbu maqolada O'zbekiston oliy ta'lim muassasalarida gamifikatsiyalashgan o'qitishni joriy etishdagi muammolar va ularning mumkin bo'lgan yechimlari tahlil qilinadi. O'z-o'zini anglash nazariyasi, "oqim" nazariyasi va konstruktivizm kabi nazariy asoslarga tayangan holda, gamifikatsiyaning zamonaviy til o'rganish yondashuvlariga mosligi tahlil qilinadi. Asosiy to'siqlar – texnologik cheklovlar, institut tomonidan qo'llab-quvvatlanmaslik, o'qituvchilar malakasining yetishmasligi va madaniy qarashlar – O'zbekiston universitetlari kontekstida tanqidiy ko'rib chiqiladi. Amaliy yechimlar sifatida o'qituvchilarni malakasini oshirish, o'quv dasturlariga integratsiya qilish, kam texnologiyali gamifikatsiya strategiyalari va raqamli savodxonlikni rivojlantirish taklif etiladi. Bundan tashqari, hatto minimal resurslar bilan ham sinfda samarali qo'llanishi mumkin bo'lgan turli gamifikatsiya platformalari ta'kidlab o'tiladi. Maqola xulosa qiladi: agar yetarli qo'llab-quvvatlash va moslashtirish mavjud bo'lsa, gamifikatsiya O'zbekiston oliy ta'lim tizimida ingliz tilini o'rgatishda tub o'zgarish keltirishi mumkin.

**Kalit so'zlar:** gamifikatsiya, til o'rganish, oliy ta'lim, O'zbekiston, raqamli pedagogika, ingliz tilini o'qitish, ta'lim innovatsiyasi, raqamli vositalar

### Introduction

Global shifts in educational paradigms have placed increasing emphasis on the integration of digital technologies into pedagogical practice, particularly in the realm of language learning. Among these innovations, gamification – the application of game-design elements in non-game contexts – has gained traction as a promising method for enhancing motivation, learner autonomy, and engagement in second language acquisition (Deterding et al., 2011; Yang, 2012). The effectiveness of gamification lies in its capacity to tap into learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, fostering more active and sustained participation.

In Uzbekistan, where English is considered a vital tool for international communication, economic development, and educational advancement, there has been a strong national push to improve English proficiency among university students (Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education, 2021). Despite this drive, instructors often face substantial barriers in implementing innovative teaching strategies, particularly those involving digital or game-based elements. Issues such as limited technological infrastructure, lack of training, and rigid curriculum design inhibit the adoption of gamification across higher education institutions.

This article seeks to explore the multifaceted challenges and potential solutions related to gamifying English language instruction at universities in Uzbekistan. It aims to:

- Provide a theoretical foundation for understanding gamification in education.
- Examine current practices and limitations in Uzbek ELT settings.
- Suggest practical, scalable solutions for integrating gamification tools.

- Offer real-life case studies demonstrating successful implementation.

By addressing these issues, the article contributes to the growing body of knowledge on contextualized educational technology integration and offers valuable insights for policy-makers, curriculum developers, and educators in similar post-Soviet or developing contexts.

### **Theoretical Background of Gamification in Language Education**

The theoretical underpinnings of gamification in education are rooted in motivational psychology, second language acquisition (SLA) theory, and instructional design. Understanding these foundations is critical to implementing gamification meaningfully in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

*Self-Determination Theory (SDT).* Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that human motivation is influenced by the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Gamification directly addresses these needs by providing learners with choices (autonomy), clear goals and feedback (competence), and opportunities for collaboration and social interaction (relatedness). Studies have shown that gamified learning environments can significantly enhance intrinsic motivation, particularly in language learning, where sustained effort over time is crucial (Domínguez et al., 2013).

*Constructivist and Experiential Learning Theories.* Gamification aligns well with constructivist learning principles, which emphasize active, student-centered learning. In gamified classrooms, students are not passive recipients of information but active participants who construct knowledge through trial and error, problem-solving, and reflection. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) further supports the use of games in education by suggesting that meaningful learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Games naturally facilitate this cycle, offering immersive environments for language input and output.

*The Input Hypothesis and Communicative Language Teaching.* Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current level ( $i+1$ ) for language acquisition. Well-designed gamified tasks often provide such input in an engaging, non-threatening context. Moreover, gamification supports Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which prioritizes interaction and authentic communication over rote memorization. Game-based activities often involve role-playing, collaborative problem-solving, and storytelling, which are core components of CLT.

*Flow Theory.* Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of "flow" describes a state of optimal engagement in which individuals are fully immersed in an activity. Games, when designed with appropriate levels of challenge and feedback, can facilitate flow, making language learning more enjoyable and effective. Language learners who experience flow are more likely to engage deeply and persist through challenges, a crucial factor in second language acquisition.

*Digital Literacy and 21st-Century Skills.* The integration of gamification also addresses the growing need to develop students' digital literacy and 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. As education systems in Uzbekistan modernize, incorporating digital game-based elements can support these broader educational goals while aligning with global trends in pedagogy (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2001).

### **Current State of English Language Teaching in Uzbek Universities**

In recent decades, Uzbekistan has made significant strides in reforming its education system, particularly in the domain of foreign language instruction. Recognizing the importance of English in global communication, the government has initiated numerous policy-level changes aimed at improving English language proficiency among students and professionals alike (Cabinet of Ministers, 2013; Presidential Decree No. PF-1875, 2012). Despite these efforts, several systemic challenges continue to hinder the effectiveness of English language teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level.

Since 2013, Uzbekistan's education system has undergone reforms aimed at aligning language instruction with international standards. The Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education

has encouraged universities to adopt innovative methodologies, including student-centered learning and digital integration. Universities are required to meet Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) benchmarks, with a growing emphasis on communicative competence rather than grammar-based instruction.

However, despite progressive policy directives, the practical implementation of these reforms has often lagged. There remains a significant gap between the envisioned transformation and the classroom realities in most public universities.

A key barrier to gamification and other modern teaching approaches is the lack of professional development among instructors. Many English teachers in Uzbek universities were educated during a period when teacher-centered, grammar-translation methods were dominant. As such, there is often a resistance or lack of familiarity with digital tools, game mechanics, and student-led instruction (Turdibekova, 2020).

In addition, pre-service and in-service teacher training programs frequently do not include sufficient focus on educational technology or gamification. This leads to a knowledge and confidence gap that prevents instructors from experimenting with gamified methodologies, even when they recognize the potential benefits.

Although urban universities in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara are increasingly equipped with smart boards, language labs, and internet connectivity, many institutions in regional areas still struggle with basic technological infrastructure. Limited access to devices, poor internet bandwidth, and lack of IT support are among the most cited reasons for not using online gamified platforms in the classroom. Furthermore, even where infrastructure exists, it is not always fully utilized due to administrative constraints or insufficient digital literacy among both teachers and students.

University students in Uzbekistan often approach English learning with extrinsic motivations – such as passing exams or qualifying for scholarships – rather than an intrinsic interest in language learning. This can result in low engagement, poor attendance, and surface-level learning. Additionally, a classroom culture that penalizes errors may increase language anxiety, making students hesitant to participate in communicative activities. Gamification has the potential to address these issues by creating low-stakes, rewarding, and interactive learning environments. However, without proper implementation, these benefits remain untapped.

A final issue lies in the rigidity of university curricula. Many language programs still follow a fixed syllabus with limited flexibility for teacher-led innovation. While some institutions allow for supplementary materials, there is often little room to meaningfully incorporate extended gamified learning modules or adjust pacing to suit interactive activities.

### **Challenges of Applying Gamification in the Uzbek Context**

Although gamification offers numerous pedagogical advantages, its application in Uzbek university classrooms is fraught with unique challenges. These obstacles are not merely technological or logistical but are also deeply rooted in cultural, institutional, and pedagogical dynamics.

Many educators in Uzbekistan remain unfamiliar with the concept of gamification, or they misunderstand it as merely adding games to lessons rather than a structured pedagogical strategy. This misconception often leads to superficial applications that fail to engage students or enhance learning outcomes. In some cases, gamification is reduced to simple point-scoring activities without aligning with curricular goals or learning outcomes.

Teachers often lack the institutional backing required to innovate with new teaching methods. Many report insufficient time, absence of clear guidelines, and lack of support from administrators for experimenting with gamified learning approaches. Moreover, gamification is rarely included in faculty development plans, making it a lower priority in academic discourse and funding.

Traditional assessment methods in universities – such as summative exams, translation tasks, and multiple-choice tests – do not align well with gamified activities that promote creative use of language, problem-solving, or collaborative tasks. As a result, teachers find it difficult to integrate

game-based learning with formal evaluations, leading to a disjointed experience where gamification is perceived as “extra” rather than central to the course.

Although digitalization is improving across the country, access to stable internet and personal devices remains inconsistent, especially in rural regions. Additionally, many students and teachers lack advanced digital literacy skills needed to navigate online gamified platforms. This digital divide exacerbates inequalities and hinders widespread implementation of gamified practices.

Uzbekistan’s academic culture tends to favor discipline, order, and teacher authority, which can sometimes conflict with the playful, exploratory spirit of gamified learning. Some educators fear that introducing game elements may reduce academic rigor or lead to distractions in the classroom. This cultural conservatism can slow down the acceptance of gamification, particularly in more traditional institutions.

Students in the same class often display wide variations in English proficiency. This makes it challenging to design games that are engaging and accessible for all learners. While advanced students may quickly solve tasks, others may struggle, leading to frustration or disengagement. Gamification tools must therefore be carefully scaffolded to cater to different proficiency levels without stigmatizing slower learners.

### **Suggested Solutions and Best Practices**

To successfully integrate gamification into English language instruction at Uzbek universities, a multi-level approach is required – one that addresses institutional, pedagogical, and technological barriers. The following solutions are drawn from best practices in educational technology, language pedagogy, and real-world applications in Uzbekistan and comparable contexts.

#### *Professional Development and Teacher Training*

Empowering instructors with the knowledge and confidence to implement gamification is a foundational step. Universities should:

- Include gamification modules in both pre-service and in-service teacher training.
- Organize workshops, webinars, and certificate programs focused on digital pedagogy and game-based learning.
- Encourage peer mentoring and communities of practice where educators can share resources, tools, and success stories.
- Gamification should be reframed as a strategic instructional method rather than a novelty, helping teachers see its value beyond just entertainment.

#### *Curriculum Flexibility and Integration*

Educational authorities and institutions should allow more flexibility within the curriculum to incorporate gamified content. This could involve:

- Developing elective or supplementary modules specifically designed for game-based learning.
- Embedding gamification into existing course materials and assessments, ensuring alignment with learning outcomes.
- Providing templates and sample lesson plans for instructors to adapt and personalize based on their classroom contexts.
- Curriculum developers can collaborate with tech-savvy educators to ensure that game mechanics support language objectives such as vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, or writing fluency

#### *Use of Low-Tech and Hybrid Gamification*

Given the technological limitations in many regions of Uzbekistan, it’s important to promote low-tech or hybrid gamification strategies, such as:

- Paper-based board games and flashcard competitions.
- Role-playing and scenario-based learning.
- Physical classroom activities with point systems and team rewards.

- Hybrid models can blend offline and online activities, using apps for homework or vocabulary review, while maintaining in-class interactivity with simpler tools.

#### *Incorporating Formative Assessment*

One major concern in implementing gamification is its perceived disconnect from formal assessments. This can be addressed by:

- Embedding formative assessment within gamified tasks – e.g., quizzes with instant feedback, peer-reviewed writing challenges, or performance-based speaking tasks.

- Using gamification tools that generate learning analytics, allowing instructors to track progress and identify areas for intervention.

- Rewarding effort and progress, not just accuracy, to promote growth-oriented learning.

- This approach can foster a more positive classroom climate and reduce test anxiety, especially for lower-proficiency students.

#### *Building Digital Literacy for All Stakeholders*

Digital literacy programs should be offered not only to students, but also to teachers and administrators. These may include:

- Tutorials on using platforms like Kahoot, Quizizz, Classcraft, or Wordwall.

- Training on how to evaluate gamification tools for language learning effectiveness.

- Workshops on safe, responsible, and ethical technology use in education.

- This will ensure that all participants are equipped to engage meaningfully with gamified environments and understand their pedagogical value.

To combat cultural resistance, institutions can:

- Showcase success stories of gamification in the local context.

- Pilot gamified modules in small classes or language clubs before scaling up.

- Recognize and reward innovative teaching practices through institutional awards, publications, or bonuses.

- Creating a supportive environment for experimentation and creativity will encourage more educators to try new approaches without fear of failure or administrative pushback.

#### **Recommended Gamification Platforms for Classroom Implementation**

The successful use of gamification in English language teaching depends heavily on selecting tools that align with learners' needs, technological capacity, and instructional goals. Below is a curated list of gamification platforms that are suitable for Uzbek university classrooms – ranging from no-tech to high-tech options.

*Kahoot!* is a game-based learning platform where teachers can create multiple-choice quizzes with visuals, timers, and leaderboards. It's user-friendly, free, and accessible on smartphones. Students love the real-time competition and immediate feedback.

*Quizizz* – Unlike Kahoot!, Quizizz allows students to complete quizzes at their own pace and can be assigned outside class. It offers automatic feedback, memes, and performance analytics. It can be used for flipped classroom tasks, grammar practice, reading comprehension.

*Wordwall* – allows teachers to create matching activities, word games, and puzzles that can be projected or printed. It's great for classrooms with limited tech or unreliable internet.

*Classcraft*. Classcraft turns the entire class into an RPG-style experience where students create avatars, complete quests, and earn points for academic and behavioral progress. Teachers can align tasks with real coursework. It can be used for semester-long engagement, teamwork, attendance tracking, task completion.

*Blooket*. Blooket combines game modes like tower defense and battle royale with educational content. It's visually engaging and fun – ideal for energizing students during long lessons. It can be applicable *in review sessions, end-of-class games.*

*Edmodo or Google Classroom (Gamified Add-ons)*. These platforms can be enhanced with gamified features like badges, points, and leaderboards using plug-ins or Google Forms with branching logic. Great for long-term projects.

Use it for: Reward systems, participation badges, long-term tracking.

There are also some games can be applied without the internet or modern technologies such as Vocabulary Bingo, Grammar Relay Races, Role-play Games (e.g., *Mystery in the Classroom*), Story Cubes or Dice-based Sentence Games. These require no tech but still include game mechanics like rules, roles, rewards, and randomness. They're ideal for under-resourced regions or backup when the internet fails. Most importantly, when selecting platforms, consider these questions:

- Is it easy to use for both teacher and student?
- Can it track learning outcomes?
- Does it support mobile access, given smartphone prevalence?
- Is it free or affordable?

Using a mix of tools based on activity goals will keep learners engaged and provide diverse learning experiences.

### Conclusion

Gamification has the potential to transform English language teaching at universities in Uzbekistan by fostering student motivation, reducing language anxiety, and promoting active learning. While systemic challenges such as outdated pedagogical approaches, insufficient infrastructure, and limited teacher training persist, these can be addressed through targeted reforms and professional development initiatives.

By leveraging platforms like Kahoot, Quizizz, Wordwall, and low-tech strategies, educators can create dynamic and inclusive environments that accommodate diverse student needs. Real-life case studies from universities across Uzbekistan reveal that gamification can be effective even in resource-limited settings, provided it is thoughtfully planned and aligned with curriculum goals.

Ultimately, the successful adoption of gamification in Uzbekistan's higher education system depends on a collaborative effort among policymakers, educators, and students. As the country continues to modernize its education sector, gamification should be embraced not as a temporary trend but as a strategic pedagogical tool that aligns with 21st-century learning priorities and the global shift toward student-centered instruction.

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